

Saturday, October 8, 2011

US tactical nuclear weapons have always been intended primarily—almost exclusively—for first use, for initiating nuclear attacks as an escalation of a conventional conflict.

US strategic weapons have always been intended primarily for a first strike against the Soviet Union, now Russia.

The actual likelihood of their use in a second strike retaliating to a successful Soviet or Russian surprise attack has always been negligible: though the illusionary prospect of such a possibility has been magnified at times, for reasons of enlarging the military budget and service shares of it and weapons development and production.

Less unlikely (since perhaps 1964) has been a possible “preemptive” strike based on warning of an imminent Soviet attack, probably mistaken warning (which has frequently occurred) though possibly not, in which case the Soviet attack would almost surely have been motivated by a decision to “preempt” a US first strike that Soviet leaders believed—rightly or wrongly—almost certainly imminent.

If their belief was correct, it would be because, in a limited conflict, the US was carrying out its recurrent threats to escalate to a first strike. (It would not be because the US was conducting a surprise preventive war, which is no more likely than a Soviet preventive attack—not in expectation of imminent attack by the adversary).

If it was false, the belief would still reflect the frequent US threats and the constant readiness to carry them out. In other words, it is those US first-strike threats and readiness that make possible, for preemptive reasons—possibly mistaken-- a Soviet/Russian first strike that would otherwise be almost unthinkable for Soviet leaders to contemplate or even prepare for.

The threat of first-use of tactical weapons is, obviously, most credible against an adversary that does not have nuclear weapons. Yet it was made initially (except perhaps for Iran in 1946) and for the rest of the Cold War against the prospect of a conventional invasion of Western Europe (or siege of Berlin) by the Soviet Union, which has been a nuclear state since 1949. The threat to meet such an attack with US nuclear weapons (tactical or strategic) could be credible (and acceptable to the Europeans) only if the US had a basis for confidence that the Soviets would not respond with nuclear retaliation, which would devastate those parts of Europe that were not destroyed by the initial US attacks. US strategic weapons capable of disarming Soviet strategic weapons and destroying its society were meant to provide that confidence; they were to deter the Soviets from responding to US first-use in Europe by the credible threat

[Well, no: the Ike threat was first-strike from the beginning. Limiting a war that involved US nuclear attacks on Soviet troops was never really feasible, or even thought to be so by officials, military or civilian (maybe some academics). Flexible response came later: too

late for the threat of US escalation to first-strike to be more than a hoax, though still probably credible enough, as a hoax, to deter the initial invasion. Or should have been; but see MccGwire!) (Flexible response” was basically crazy, a crazy policy based on crazy premises; But so was a SIOP response to an attack on Europe, by that time! The mid-Sixties should have led to a totally different arrangement, for Europe, when damage-limiting became infeasible.) (FU could still have worked, backed by a FS hoax, against non-Soviet forces.)

(Before that, the US FS policy meant sacrificing Europe, but not, consciously, the US too! It implied ruthlessness, but not conscious US suicide: though it would have been suicidal, unknown to the US; SAC was a Doomsday Machine, without using cobalt bombs or igniting the atmosphere; by igniting the local tinder in simultaneous, nationwide attacks (Tokyo firestorms—lofting soot dust and smoke into the stratosphere—simultaneously on all 64 cities...) (firebombs simultaneously over a large area harnessed the wind; TN weapons simultaneously harnessed wind and smoke). (McN and JFK did think as if the world would be destroyed, realistically though without evidential basis at that time. Nixon, et al, did not.)

Moreover, virtually all the other potential targets for US tactical weapons during the Cold War—though they were themselves non-nuclear weapons states—were allies or clients of the Soviet Union or China. (China acquired nuclear weapons soon after ceasing to be an ally of the Soviet Union itself; and for most of the interval in-between, from 1959-64, it was misperceived by American leaders as being still part of the “Sino-Soviet Bloc,” protected by a Soviet “umbrella”). Thus American leaders faced at least a possibility that the Soviets would respond to a US first-use of nuclear weapons against their ally with their own retaliatory “second-use” of nuclear weapons, either in the same region or elsewhere.

US foreign policy and nuclear policy sought to prevent the Soviets from extending such a “nuclear umbrella” over their allies and clients in the Third World: primarily those bordering the “Sino-Soviet Bloc” such as Indochina (Laos, Cambodia, North and South Vietnam), North Korea. (Their own troops in Iran? Or the Middle East?)

By JFK odds, the risk of nuclear war came from the Soviets creating a situation in which the US could avoid defeat only by initiating FU against Soviet troops. He thought (wrongly!) that there was a 1/3 to 1/2 chance that they would do **that**, in the face of US moves against Cuba (blockade, attack, invasion).

The Soviets needed no FU or FS threats! (exception! Cuba! Imitation of US!) Nor FS threats to back them up, except for preemptive threat (after 1964—when no long much needed, given its second-strike threat; i.e., it didn’t “need” a preemptive threat, which was worthless for damage-limiting anyway! The threat was real, and supported the US escalatory and preemptive threats, endangering the SU; it was dangerously mistaken for Brezhnev and the Soviet military to “learn” from C-II that they needed a force modeled on the US, to avoid being forced to back down ever again. (The real lesson was, not to get into a position from which they would have to back down: e.g.,

Berlin. We **were** able to keep Berlin; but for that matter, they were able to keep Cuba—even without a FU threat. Cuba had a big self-defense capability, enough to hold off even Reagan/Haig...after Vietnam, when we understood guerrilla war! Vietnam protected Cuba; the Bay of Pigs protected Laos, but not Cuba or (given “success in Cuba) Vietnam.

No one else has had a FS threat (against a major nuclear power).

But a number have needed and used FU threats (against superior conventional forces). US; (UK vs. Argentine sub in Falklands!); Israel; Pakistan; North Korea (not essential);

US is the one that plans and carries out interventions thousands of miles from its shores, facing locally superior conventional forces (Berlin, China/Korea, the offshore islands, Vietnam, Laos, possibly Iran, the ME, possibly Syria 1970, Iraq/Lebanon 1958). Except perhaps for the latter, a FS capability was helpful (or necessary—at least, the appearance of one, a façade, a possible basis for US over-optimism (of the kind the JCS did have in 1962, the time of its greatest advantage: still over-optimistic about the threat to Europe)—to deter Soviet second-use retaliation or from considering matching our escalation.